

Poetry in Motion -- A Technique in Writing

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Poetry can be one of the most difficult types of literature to bring to life for students. But if you are able to use poetry in your lessons, you can give your students not only an increased awareness and understanding of English-speaking cultures, but also great sensual, emotional, and intellectual pleasure.

Why Use Poetry to Learn English?

1. Poetry is a special type of English, just as scientific and newspaper English are also special in different ways. It deserves study as much as they do-perhaps more, since poetry is the type of English that touches our personal feelings most closely. And personal feelings are as important in a foreign language as they are in our own language.
2. Poetry can help us to assimilate the typical rhythms of a language.
3. Poems are often very easy to remember. They stick in our minds without conscious effort. One reason for this is that they frequently repeat words or patterns of sound.
4. The topics that poems talk about are in themselves interesting-and important. When we are learning a foreign language as an adult we need to have significant things to think and talk about. Poems offer this.

Why Should We Write, as well as Read, Poems?

1. The process of composing poems, especially if it is done in groups, leads to real discussion about something that matters to you.
2. It also allows you to try out different ways of saying the same thing. And to make different combinations of words and sentences. This process of “playing” with language is important in developing your confidence in using it.
3. It gives you a purpose for writing and allows you to bring in your personal feelings and ideas. Many other types of writing in a foreign language do not encourage this.

Writing Poetry

Writing has come to occupy the prominent role it deserves in foreign-language teaching and learning. Its value is confirmed by the latest research, which shows the classical relevance of writing as a recycling tool in the classroom. The act of writing not only reflects our thinking but also helps to create new thoughts.

One way to lead our students into the writing of poetry is by giving them a model. The teacher should carefully select a poem that relates to his/her students' needs, and then work with it in class, exploiting both the semantic and content/ context aspects. After analyzing the poem, students can write their own poems, following a format similar to the original but giving their own views on the subject.

Step 1. A way to vary this activity is for the teacher to divide the class into groups and write the verses on the board or on a photocopied sheet out of sequence so that they can re-order them. You could use a limerick for this activity.

There was an old man of Peru
Who dreamt he was eating a shoe.
He awoke in the night
In a terrible fright
And found it was perfectly true.

Step 2. Another way to approach the writing of poetry is to give the students a poem with a verse missing. Work through the remaining verses for comprehension and then ask them to write a version of the missing verse. Once they have written their sentences they can compare them to the original.

Step 3. If the poem has a story line, you can give the students the central characters and some key words or lines. Then let the students create their own story. When they read the original, they can compare their plot to the poet's.

Step 4. Try to inspire your students to be creative. After they have studied a few poems, encourage them to write their own in English. Emphasise layout. Tell them that it is not necessary that the words rhyme. Let them create limericks on a given subject. Below is an example of a limerick written by a student after being given a first line.

There was an old man who had no beard.
He had some cattle, which he reared.
He lived on a hill, in a lovely house
With no money, no children, and no spouse.
And that is why he never in public appeared.

Step 5. When the students finish, the teacher asks them to work in pairs, to read each other's poem and exchange ideas about the content of the poem. The teacher should encourage revision and editing at all times. As a good follow-up activity, the teacher can ask the students to read

their poems aloud in small groups and have their classmates suggest possible titles for the poems, explaining their choices. It has been my experience that very enriching discussions arise from the students' own poems.

A Final Comment

I must emphasize the enormous sense of achievement students get from this kind of writing. The poems are a source of motivation for the students when they later go back over their poem and discover new elements within their ideas. It is also a source of motivation for the teacher, who sees his/her role extended to an unprecedented level-that of guiding students to the threshold of their artistic potential.

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